



LEARNING TO SEE THE GLASS HALF FULL

There's a tendency to make assessments as the year draws to a close. We look back at what happened during the year. Then we look forward into what the coming year might bring. While everyone can see the same things looking back, what we see looking forward can be as different as night and day. Those who see daylight are called optimists. That's the group you want to belong to as often as possible.

But wait. Why strive for optimism? Aren't the pessimists who see darkness descending right just as often? Or what about being a realist – assessing the facts and coming to a rational conclusion? Why should you try to be an optimist?

Because being optimistic is good for you.

Studies indicate that optimists have longer, healthier lives. A 30-year study by the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, found pessimists were almost 20 percent less likely than optimists to fulfill their life expectancy.¹ And the study found that the more pessimistic the person, the greater the risk of premature death. Follow-up research determined that optimistic people had better health across the board.

Most people think optimists are born, not made. They see perpetual optimism as a personality trait engrained in someone's DNA. But there's evidence that that's not necessarily so. The emerging field of positive psychology – basically, the study of what makes people happy and optimistic – is preaching that we can learn to be optimistic. University of Pennsylvania Professor Martin Seligman, considered the father of positive psychology, wrote a book titled *Learned Optimism*. According to his theory, even pessimists can be optimistic if they condition themselves to behave the way optimists do.² For example, pessimists explain the good things that happen to them as temporary and narrowly focused³ ("Yeah, the boss said I did a great job, but I was lucky and it won't happen with the other projects I'm working on."), while the optimist sees good things as permanent and pervasive³ ("Wow, the boss said I did a great job. I'm good at what I do, and I'm getting better with all of my work."). So, one of the keys to optimism is to consciously explain things to yourself in the positive way an optimist would.

The Mayo Clinic offers these tips on how to be more optimistic⁴:

- » Stop negative self talk. When you catch yourself thinking that you won't enjoy an event or do well on a project, stop the thought. Instead, identify the positives in the situation.
- » Find joy in your work. No matter what kind of job it is, find some aspect that's personally satisfying.
- » Surround yourself with positive, upbeat people.
- » Deal with situations you can control, and try to accept those you can't.
- » Put things in perspective. Life may take you on difficult paths. Try to find the adventure.
- » Each day, write down three positive things that happened that day as well as speculations about why those good things happened.

And remember that feeling good about the world begins with feeling good about yourself. Do the things that make you feel healthier and more self-confident. Eat properly, relieve your stress, get outside and get some exercise in the sunshine. Before you know it, you'll see brighter days ahead.

(continued)

¹ Medscape Medical News: *Mayo Clinic Study Finds Optimistic People Live Longer*; <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/411666>

² EQ Today, Fall 2000: *An Interview with Martin EP Seligman, Ph.D.*; <http://www.eqtoday.com/optimism/seligman.html>

³ Positive Psychology News Daily: *Learning Optimism*, By Doug Turner; <http://pos-psych.com/news/doug-turner/2007011536>

⁴ Mayo Clinic, November 3, 2005: *Put on a Happy Face – For a Longer Life*; <http://www.mayoclinic.org/news2005-mchi/3103.html>

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